

Alter's Halfway House
U.S. Route 22
New Alexandria Vicinity
Westmoreland County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5477

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65-NEWALN,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ALTER'S HALFWAY HOUSE

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- Location: On a hill on the south side of U.S. Rte. 22, 4.6 miles east of the junction of Rte. 22 and Pa. Rte. 981, New Alexandria vicinity, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.
- Present Owner: Lee A. Barnhart.
- Present Occupant: None.
- Significance: Alters Tavern or Halfway House is a log building dating to the 1830s when this region of Westmoreland and Indiana counties was experiencing growth made possible by the Northern Turnpike and the newly-opened Pennsylvania Canal. The building was conveniently located to attract travelers alongside the Turnpike, now U.S. Route 22. It functioned as a tavern for at least 26 years (1834-60). Members of the Alters family were also farmers. The several additions and alterations to the building are typical of Pennsylvania log building tradition and reflect its changing uses as a farmhouse and a tavern.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: ca. 1834.
2. Architect: none.
3. Original and subsequent owners: A deed was registered at the Westmoreland County Courthouse on February 1, 1835, for the transfer of this property in Derry Township from Nathaniel and Jane Doty to Jacob Alter, the first proprietor of Alters Halfway House (Alter and Alters is used interchangeably in records). "Jockey" McLaughlin is also reported to have operated the tavern, but there is no record of his ownership. It remained in the Alter family--passing from Jacob Sr. to Jacob O. Alter in April 1870--until July 1901. William S. and Jacob Byers held the property from 1901 to 1905 when it was purchased by W. E. Kinnan. In 1942, the Kinnan estate sold it to Morris Shendowich who sold it the same year to George and Mary Lee Vogle. The Vogles sold it to their neighbors, the present owners, Lee A. and Mary Jo Barnhart, in 1972. (Deed books 66:324-26; 324:200; 380:288; 382:546; 1074:15; 1127:22; 2009:460; 2092:1062)
4. Original plans and construction: The original section of this building is a typical early log building form with a single pen, one-and-a-half-story plan. It faced north with a door and window placed opposite each other on front and back walls. A third window was cut in the west end wall. A brick chimney took up most of the

east wall.

Logs were hewn square and secured at the corners with V-shaped notches. V-notching was the second most common form of corner timbering in the region. It is believed to be an adaptation of saddle notching, the most common form, in which the notches are rounded rather than V-shaped. Both methods were carried west from the southeastern Pennsylvania settlement area.

5. Alterations and additions: Two major additions were made to the east end of the original block. These two-story log additions telescoped from the smaller original building, a typical log building practice. The first abutted the original structure. A first-floor hearth was cut through to share the older chimney stack. The second, three-bay addition had an exterior end chimney of brick and was connected to the first by a framed passage section containing front and back doorways. When completed, the building was more than tripled in size; six bays were added to the original two. Horizontal wood siding unified the sections and covered the evidence of log construction on the building's facade. A shed-roofed porch supported by wood posts extended across the front from the original section to the beginning of the third. A second shed-roofed porch was added to the back of the original sections and was sheltered by an end wall of vertical boards.

The dates of these additions are unknown. They are shown in photographs taken in the early 1930s as part of a survey of western Pennsylvania architecture. Since that time the rear porch and the third addition and its frame connecting section have been removed, and a shed-roofed dormer with two one-over-one lights was added to the front of the original section. Horizontal wood siding now covers the second-story area of the rear wall and gable end of the remaining two-story addition. An exterior stone chimney inscribed with the date 1943 was erected along its end wall.

B. Historical Context:

1. The Road:

Although the main highways in western Pennsylvania today follow practically the same routes that were used during the golden era of the turnpike, the modern motorist finds little to recall the dramatic atmosphere of their earlier days. The hum of automotive traffic has replaced the blast of the coachman's horn, the shouts of the drover and the teamster, the creaking of the wagons The only tangible reminders of this memorable era are the few taverns . . . that have survived the modern reconstruction of the highways (Stotz, 173)

Although it is easily overlooked because of its location above the highway and behind several trees, Alter's Halfway House is one of those "tangible reminders" of Route 22's long history as a transportation link across western Pennsylvania. While the tavern has been a contemporary of the road since the era of local turnpikes in the 1830s, the road predates the building by many years and could itself serve as another kind of tangible link to the years before European immigrants mapped and named the route.

Route 22 generally follows the route of the Frankstown Path, an eighteenth-century Indian trail named for German trader Stephen Franks. The trail extended from Frankstown near Hollidaysburg on the Frankstown branch of the Juniata River, crossed the Conemaugh River a few miles northeast of the future site of Alter's tavern, and continued west to the Allegheny River.

In the mid-eighteenth century white traders, then settlers and drovers used the Indians' trails, establishing them by custom as rights of way that eventually received official state sanction as public roads. In March 1787, the Pennsylvania General Assembly directed that a road be constructed from the Frankstown branch of the Juniata River to the point on the Conemaugh "where the river began to be navigable, at all seasons." Robert Galbraith, then prothonotary of Bedford County, contracted for the road's construction and following these instructions and the route of the Frankstown Path, he completed it to the confluence of the Blacklick Creek with the Conemaugh, a few miles west of the present Blairsville. Here, at the village of Newport, a ferry carried travelers across the Conemaugh to Westmoreland County. About 1791, the road was extended from this point to Pittsburgh. (Africa, 30; Albert, 185; Stewart, 45)

In 1800 the Harrisburg, Lewistown, Huntingdon, and Pittsburgh Turnpike was chartered to have charge of the route. It was more familiarly known as the Northern Turnpike to distinguish it from the southern turnpike running from Harrisburg through Bedford and Greensburg to Pittsburgh. Development of the Northern Pike was hampered in 1811 when the rival Greensburg Pike was selected over the northern route to receive a \$300,000 state grant for construction and expansion. (Albert, 185; Boucher, 239-40)

The Northern Turnpike had to rely on local subscription and tolls derived in large part from the trade in salt and iron. In 1826 "it was estimated that 578,160 bushels of salt and 17,440 tons of iron arrived annually at Pittsburgh by land and water from districts bordering on the Conemaugh and Kiskeminetas" rivers. These figures did not include "the flour, whiskey, and other produce" carried over land and waterways to Pittsburgh from the Juniata region. Transportation of goods by land between Baltimore, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh increased further the tonnage and transportation-related revenues. (Stewart, 49)

The Northern Pike was a link for cross-Pennsylvania traffic between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. It also led directly through the iron and agricultural regions along

the Juniata and Conemaugh. It was active economy as much as topography that led developers in the 1820s to locate the route of a Pittsburgh-Philadelphia canal from the Juniata to the Conemaugh. The western division of the canal opened in 1828. It ran along the north side of the Conemaugh River which formed the boundary between Indiana and Westmoreland Counties, but "its direct benefits were extended in a perceptible manner to the whole of the lower part of Ligonier Valley, and as far south as New Derry [and] New Alexandria" in southern Derry Township. (Albert, 401)

Alter's Tavern was first noted in Derry Township tax records in 1834. It was situated along the Northern Pike that led east to the canal. An 1867 map shows another road that crossed the Turnpike a few hundred yards to the east and led north to the canal. This location benefitted both from the usual land traffic and the increased canal-related traffic. The Tavern does not appear on county records after 1860, after the canal's decline.

2. The Tavern and Its Proprietors

Taverns did not materially differ in appearance from private houses. . . . In fact, many taverns originally were private homes adapted to accommodate the evergrowing business of the road. . . . The enlargements made to accommodate the increasing traffic are obvious in . . . the Halfway House, and others. (Stotz, 173)

George Swetnam and Helene Smith claim that "Alters Halfway House was built during the 1830s as a tavern halfway between Johnstown and Pittsburgh." While this is possible, it does not seem to be documented, and the form of the building itself indicates that additions were made at different times to meet the changing needs of the owners. It is likely that, as Stotz's description of taverns suggests, the one-and-a-half-story section was built first as a farmstead and that the two-story sections were added, possibly in the 1830s, for use as a tavern. This hypothesis also fits the evidence provided by county deed, tax, and census records.

On February 14, 1835, Jacob Alter officially purchased 127 acres in Derry Township from Nathaniel and Jane Doty. At the 1830 census the Dotys were between the ages of 60-70 and 50-60, respectively. Nathaniel had purchased the property in 1799 from Jonathan Riggs who had patented it from the Commonwealth the year before. Nathaniel was one of the incorporators and stockholders in a covered bridge built on the Northern Turnpike in 1821-22. The bridge spanned the Conemaugh from Blairsville into Westmoreland County. Doty was listed in tax records as a farmer and his involvement in the bridge project indicates the importance of the Turnpike for local Derry Township residents. (Stewart, 463-64) Although there is no mention of existing buildings in any of the deed transactions for this property, it is possible that the one-and-a-half-story section of Alters Halfway House began life as the Doty farmhouse.

Jacob Alter is reported to have built a tavern, the Henry Hotel, operated for several years by John Henry, in Blairsville in 1829. (Swetnam, 254; Historical Record of Blairsville, 105; Stephenson, 18) If this is true it establishes a longer term interest in tavern-keeping and suggests that he may have selected the Halfway House property because of its potential as a tavern location. The additions to the one-and-a-half story, one-room building shown in c. 1930 photographs and probably made by Alter are commensurate with its use as a tavern. The two-story sections containing extra rooms with separate entrances, probably a separate stairway, and an additional large hearth, and the porch across the front of the building would all accommodate tavern customers. (Stotz, 173)

The Alter family of Westmoreland County was of Swiss descent and is supposed to have settled first in the southwest corner of the county where "Alters mills" became a center for the area's milling and grinding needs. (Albert, 364) Jacob Alter was taxed for 66 acres, two cows and a horse as a resident of Allegheny Township in the northwestern section of the county in 1831. By 1833, two years before the deed recording his purchase from Doty, he was taxed in Derry Township for ownership of 130 acres, two horses and two cows. In 1834 he was registered as an innkeeper in Derry Township.

J. T. Stewart's 1913 history of Indiana County gives the earliest reference found to Alters tavern as "The Half Way House," a common name for taverns since the 1600s. Stewart also reports that both 'Jockey' McLaughlin and Jacob Alter kept taverns at what is known as "The Half Way House on the pike to New Alexandria west of [Blairsville]." According to tax records, McLaughlin did have a tavern "on the pike" in 1832, but he is never recorded as owning the property. Because in 1838 both Alter and McLaughlin paid separate fees for taverns on the turnpike, it seems likely that McLaughlin's enterprise was at some other location.

Tax and census records provide equally inconclusive information on the Alter family. The 1850 census recorded Jacob and Sarah Alter with two children--Hannah, 33, and Jacob, 30--and three other members of the household--Barbara Footmonger, 23, Caroline Jellison, 14, and Joseph Stump, 14--who presumably were other relatives or hired help. Jacob's occupation was listed as farmer while tax records for the years 1834-55 list his payment for operating a tavern. The census also recorded Adam Alter, probably an older son, as head of a separate household with wife Barbara, two children and five young men and women with different surnames. Adam's occupation was given as innkeeper. In tax records he began to be listed as an innkeeper in 1846. Before that his occupation was recorded as "tinner." In 1853 both Adam and Jacob paid tavern fees of \$125 and \$75, respectively. While Adam may have operated the Halfway House, this separate taxation of both men again suggests that they had separate establishments. In 1856 Adam was recorded as operating a tavern at the specific location of Bairdstown, a village north of the Halfway House along the Conemaugh River. County atlases for 1867 and 1873 show an "A. Alters" living on the north side of the Pike a short distance east of the Halfway House. In 1856 the

tax assessor noted that Jacob Alter was "aged." His occupation was given as farmer until 1866 when his name disappears from the record.

Jacob's second son, Jacob O. Alter, married Mary Stickle on July 4, 1857 (Fischer, 2). Tax records listed him as a farmer from 1843 until his death by 1876. In 1860, though, census takers recorded him as a tavernkeeper living in the same household with his wife, one-year-old son, and his mother and father, a farmer. From all of this information it is at least certain that the Alter family was accustomed to tavernkeeping and that farming functioned as a more stable supplement and fall-back occupation.

By 1880 both Jacob O. and Adam Alter had died; their widows were both listed in their place as farmers. In 1881, about twenty years after the Halfway House had apparently ceased to be run as a tavern, it was designated as the voting place for residents of the county subdivision of "Alters District" (Albert, 418), indicating the prominence the family had gained as local business people and the "Halfway House"'s continuing association as a public meeting place.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This log building consists of two sections set end-to-end: the original one-and-a-half-story, single-pen block and a larger two-story, mid-nineteenth-century addition. Both were built of squared logs secured with V-notched corner timbering. The building faces north and overlooks U.S. Route 22. The logs on its facade have been covered with horizontal weatherboarding.
2. Condition of fabric: Deteriorating. Logs at the base of the southwest corner have fallen away.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The original one-and-a-half-story block measures 19'-9" (two-bay front) x 19'-0". The two-story addition measures 24'-0" (two-bay front) x 19'-0". There is a small (15'-7" x 10'-0") cellar under part of the original block. It has walls of flat fieldstone.
2. Foundations: Stone.
3. Walls: The walls of both sections are horizontal logs infilled with clay and pebbles. The interstices have been covered with wire netting and cement. Horizontal wood siding covers the entire front wall and the second story of the addition's end and rear walls.

4. Structural sytem, framing: Log.
5. Porches: A shed-roofed porch, supported by five square wood posts, extends across the front of the building.
6. Chimneys: A brick chimney is located in the east wall of the original block. A second, made of roughly finished sandstone, was built on the exterior of the east-end wall.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Two doorways with plain wood framing are located opposite each other, slightly to the east of center, in the original block. They are panelled wood with two lights in the top. A pent roof supported by brackets shelter the rear doorway.

A concrete block stairway leads to the cellar entrance at the southwestern end of the rear of the building. Rusted metal doors cover the stairs.
 - b. Windows: Due to the irregularities inherent in log construction, the windows are of different sizes and are set somewhat unevenly. There are two on each floor of the addition's front and back walls, one on its first-floor end wall. The original block has one window on its front and back walls and one on each floor of its end wall.

There are three varieties of windows--six-light, set both horizontally and vertically, and four-over-four-light and six-over-six-light sashes.
8. Roof: The gable roof over the original block is covered with corrugated metal roofing; that over the addition with red asphalt shingles.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The original block consists of one room. The addition is also one room in depth, but a partition divides it into two rooms. The rooms are accessed by doorways set in the partitions along the back wall.
2. Stairway: A simple wood stairway was located on the north side of the chimney stack in the original block. It is for the most part rotted and broken away so that the second floor is inaccessible.
3. Flooring: Linoleum over wood.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The interior walls and ceiling surfaces have been entirely covered with plasterboard.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Doorways have plain wood surrounds and a large light in the top third. A board-and-batten door opens between the two sections of the building.
- b. Windows: Plain board surround.

6. Decorative features and trim: The only fireplace now in the building's first floor is in the central room. It is made of regularly coursed finished stone. Two rows of three voussoirs form a decorative arch over the hearth opening. The heavy pointing is painted red. The mantel is a plain wood plank.

7. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Heating: Stove pipe openings into the chimney flues in the east and west rooms indicate that heating was by coal or wood stoves.
- b. Lighting: Electric.
- c. Plumbing: A single pipe was run to a sink in the west room used as a kitchen. There was an open drain from the sink into the cellar.

A hand pump is set in a concrete platform that juts out from the porch in front of the building. It raised water from a well there.

D. Site:

- 1. General setting and orientation: The building faces north and overlooks the east-west highway, U.S. Route 22. The building and road were once on the same level but in reconstruction the roadway was cut down into the hillside so that the building now sits at the top of a steep bank above the road. Three house trailers are set on lots behind the building. The Windmill Restaurant is directly across the highway.
- 2. Historic landscape design: The building was originally sited at the edge of the "Northern Turnpike," formerly the Frankstown Path and now U.S. Rte. 22. The location served practical and economic purposes. As the location for a farm, it provided easy access to a roadway and markets. As the location for a tavern, like that of the present restaurant across the road, it attracted travelers by its visibility and easy access.

Part III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early views:

Photographs from the Western Pennsylvania Architectural Survey, No. W3-84 "Halfway House," c. 1930-36, Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh, Pa. Seven views, one appears in Stotz, 42. (cited below)

B. Bibliography:

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION.

This report was prepared by Kim E. Wallace for the Historic American Buildings Survey in the spring of 1989 as part of America's Industrial Heritage Project, National Park Service.